Developing an effective research proposal

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Topics
- Expectations and functions of a proposal
- Some common pitfalls
- Unpacking the sections of a proposal
- Strategies and tactics to improve a proposal

Aims of this session
- To provide researchers, and other interested individuals, with some key insights into developing effective research proposals
- To provide strategies and tactics which will improve your chance of success

Expectations and functions of a proposal
Probability of approval will depend on:
- the clarity and thoroughness of your proposal
- evidence of your understanding of the issues
- your prior experience and knowledge in undertaking similar work

Expectations and functions
The P's and C's
- phase and communication
- process and context
- product and clarity
- plan and contract

Expectations and functions
Four main functions:
- what the proposed research is about
- what we will learn from it and why it is important
- what the research is trying to find out or achieve
- how it will go about doing that
Expectations and functions
- The proposal should not need the researcher’s presence to interpret or make sense of what is being said
- It is an argument which needs to have a coherent line of reasoning and internal consistency
  (Punch, 2000)

NCVER’s evaluation criteria
- Demonstrated knowledge
- Proposed research
- Methodology
- Research experience and expertise

Reader’s expectations
- Readers need to have sufficient information in the proposal to make an informed judgement
- Is the proposed research ‘do-able’ (realistic)?
- Can the proponent do it - and what evidence is given?
- If done - will it produce a successful outcome and what will we learn?

Some common responses
- “Proponent does not have a grasp of the issues”
- “I’m not convinced the research questions will fully address the purpose of the research”
- “Interesting - but what is it going to tell us that we don’t already know?”
- “I’m just not convinced this is going to work”

More common responses
- “Not enough detail here - how many people are they interviewing, what industries are covered, and what about the practitioners?”
- “It is not clear that the method proposed will deliver the desired outcome”
- “What evidence is there that they have the right skills and experience to do this?”

Avoid the following pitfalls
- Rationale is weak
- Writing is vague
- Outcomes are uncertain
- Do not have relevant experience
- Project is too large or ‘ambitious’
- Project is too limited
- Does not represent value for money
Unpacking the various elements of a proposal

Conceptual framework
- What the research is trying to find out, do or achieve - research questions
- How the research proposes to answer the question(s) - methods
- Why the research is worth doing - context and outcomes

Sections of a proposal
- Background and context
- Purpose statement
- Research questions
- Methodology
- Outcomes
- Supporting documentation

Background and context
- Review of relevant literature
- Context
- Aims
- Significance

Research purpose statement
- A concise statement of the need or problem
- How you know this is important
- What you intend to do about it

Succinctly answer the questions:
- 'why are you doing it...and... so what?'

Research questions
- Central to the research proposal
- Need to be precise
- Put thought into them and come back to them!
- General and specific questions
Methodology

- Wide variety of methods possible
- Must specify and justify your research methods and how you will interpret the results
- Not just a list of research tasks
- Make it clear what you intend to do and how

Tips for your methodology section

- Link your methodology back to the needs you identified in your background and purpose statement
- Align your research questions and methods
- Clearly present innovative aspects of your methodology

Outcomes and outputs

- State what you expect the research to yield
- Specify what you will produce

Tips…..

- Make sure your plan stacks up with the declared aim
- Explain how the plan will work - use flowcharts
- Leave the reader with something (positive) to remember!
- Be as succinct as possible

And let’s not forget...

- Titles
- Budgets
- Project team and steering committees
- Addressing the guidelines
- Writing style

Title of your research

- Create a lasting first impression
- Clear, concise and unambiguous
- Keep it short
- Title should not be a summary of your research!
- Capture the focus of your research
- Most important words should come first
Remove unnecessary words:
- The systematic development of a local initiative to create a learning centre for community education
- A local learning centre for community education

Budgets
- Realistic
- Consistent with research activities
- Transparent
- Within any guidelines

Project team and steering committees
- Specify roles clearly
- Enlist the support of a steering committee

Writing style
- Keep sentences short
- Use short paragraphs
- Use good, plain English
- Structure your points
- Impress the reader with clear thought and reasoning
- Avoid acronyms

Dealing with different types of research methods
- Research studies will vary from tightly planned and structured to unfolding, or action research
- The distinction is important when it comes to research questions and articulating your plan in the proposal

Conceptual framework continuum

- Specific research questions
- Structured design
- Data pre-structured
- Qualitative research
- General open-ended questions
- Loose design
- Data not pre-structured
- Quantitative research
- Structured design
- Data pre-structured
Tips to increase success

- Comply with the guidelines
- Excite!
- Influence
- Establish credibility
- Build confidence
- Differentiate